
Posted on Fri, Apr. 07, 2006

GOP lawmakers revive Auburn Dam debate

SAVING SACRAMENTO DURING FLOOD AT ISSUE

By Erica Werner
Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Key Republican lawmakers said Thursday that building a dam on the American River at Auburn is the only way to protect Sacramento against catastrophic flooding that might occur once every 500 years.

But the head of the California Department of Water Resources cautioned against losing focus on flood-control projects now under way that are meant to give 200-year protection to the region.

Sacramento is now protected at only the 100-year level -- the lowest of any large urban area in the nation.

“Our focus right now in the state is that we need to be sure we get these improvements and not get distracted by the next debate over Auburn Dam,” Department of Water Resources Director Lester Snow testified at a hearing of the House Resources Committee’s subcommittee on energy and water.

“The debate in the past has actually delayed investment in flood improvements in the region,” Snow said.

Before Snow spoke, committee chair Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Stockton, and subcommittee chair Rep. George Radanovich, R-Fresno, both spoke in favor of an Auburn Dam, underscoring growing congressional interest in reviving the controversial project years after it seemed to be abandoned for good.

The Auburn Dam north of Sacramento was long championed by Rep. John Doolittle, R-Granite Bay, until he struck a 2003 deal with then-Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento, to abandon it in favor of a package of improvements to the 50-year-old Folsom Dam on the American River south of Auburn.

State officials are working to restore some levees in the area, and in combination with the Folsom improvements, 200-year flood protection is supposed to be achieved.

But cost overruns at Folsom, combined with the renewed focus on flood protection in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, appear to have significantly revived congressional interest in the Auburn Dam.

In addition to skepticism from the administration of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, the renewed attention to Auburn is sour news to Democrats who believe the focus should stay firmly on other repairs now under way.

“I think we all agree that this controversial proposal is no substitute for action now to protect Sacramento from a tragic flood,” Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said in a statement Thursday, adding she remained concerned about building a major dam in an earthquake-prone area.

© 2006 MercuryNews.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.mercurynews.com>